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ORGANIZING FOR REFORM IN BIG-CITY SCHOOLS.

BY- LEVINE, DANIEL U.

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PROPOSED IS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW DEPARTMENT IN LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR IDENTIFYING AND CORRECTING DYSFUNCTIONS IN THE SCHOOLS. ONE UNIT OF SUCH A DEPARTMENT WOULD BE AUTHORIZED TO CONDUCT INSPECTIONS WHICH COULD REVEAL CONDITIONS AND SITUATIONS CONTRIBUTING TO THE POOR FUNCTIONING OF URBAN SCHOOLS. THIS UNIT COULD ALSO INITIATE CORRECTIVE ACTION. ANOTHER DEPARTMENTAL DIVISION SERVING AS AN OMBUDSMAN WOULD INVESTIGATE CITIZEN AND SCHOOL STAFF GRIEVANCES. IT IS FELT THAT THIS PROPOSED STRUCTURAL CHANGE MIGHT HELP "REALIGN AND REVITALIZE A POORLY FUNCTIONING BUREAUCRACY." THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 48, NUMBER 7, MARCH 1967. (NH)

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In this March 1967 Issue

	Page
Editorial, The City Is the Frontier	305
Decline and Crisis in Big-City Education, *Robert E. Mason*	306
Organizing for Reform in Big-City Schools, *Daniel U. Levine*	311
The Economics of Education in Urban Society, *Charles S. Benson*	316
Big-City Education: A Cooperative Endeavor, *Robert J. Havighurst*	320
Nashville: Experiment in Urban School Consolidation, *John Egerton* and *Jim Leeson*	323
A Proposed Structure for Urban School Systems, *Philip M. Katz*	325
Urban School Systems (A Response to Mr. Katz), *Herbert A. Thelen*	327
The Education Park Concept in Pittsburgh, *S. P. Marland, Jr.*	328
Making Public Schools Accountable: A Case Study of P.S. 201 in Harlem, *Nat Hentoff*	332
The Dynamics of Self-Deception, *Elliott Shapiro*	336
The Peter Principle: We're All Incompetent, *Laurence J. Peter*	339
The Quick Response Approach in Urban Vocational Training, *Dick Turpin*	342
Two Years of Head Start, *William F. Brazziel*	345
Head Start Six Months Later, *Max Wolff and Annie Stein*	349
B.C. (Before Compensatory), *Florence Lewis*	351
Instructional Planning in Early Compensatory Education, *Carl Bereiter*	355
Intellectual Pressure Cooker—a Report on Bereiter's School	357
Boarding Schools for the Disadvantaged, *F. James Clatworthy*	360
ERIC: Data on the Disadvantaged, *Patricia Calkins* and *Joan Gussow*	362
Programs for the Disadvantaged at Hunter College, *Milton J. Gold*	365
Books for Leaders	366
Keeping Abreast in Education	373
Scraps from a Teacher's Notebook, *Don Robinson*	376

COVER PHOTO This scene was photographed last summer in a Head Start class at Toledo, Ohio. Our thanks to Richard Allen Huston, director of Head Start for the Toledo Board of Education, for the excellent photograph.—**The Editors**

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ORGANIZING FOR REFORM IN BIG-CITY SCHOOLS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

By DANIEL U. LEVINE

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DESPAIRING over an apparent inability to correct the serious dysfunctions which permeate the big-city schools,* a number of individuals and groups have expressed serious doubt that the public schools are capable of undertaking the profound reforms which would enable them to provide an adequate education for the disadvantaged youth of the big cities. Several of these observers, as a consequence, have recommended the establishment and support of a competing network of nonpublic schools which might be less resistant to change than are the public schools.[1] Most educators have not taken this recommendation very seriously, if, indeed, they have been aware of it at all.

Now, however, with the recent publication of the report on "The Disadvantaged Poor: Education and Employment" by the task force on economic growth and opportunity of the generally conservative United States Chamber of Commerce, it is no longer so easy to ignore this recommendation and the reasoning behind it. For the task force, as noted in an advance summary in *Education U.S.A.*, concluded that because "the present institutional structure in education

Photo by A. Devaney

*Although space limitations make it impossible to illustrate these dysfunctions or to consider why they occur so frequently and are so seldom corrected in the big cities, such an analysis is part of a longer version of this paper which is available upon request to the Editor, Phi Delta Kappa, 8th & Union, Bloomington, Ind.

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may not be the best way to organize it," the government should "consider continuing to finance education for all children—but that it offer them, as an alternative to public education, financial support for private education up to the amount of the average expenditure in local public schools."[2]

We should not take lightly the opinion of respected and knowledgeable observers who are pessimistic about the possibility of significantly reforming present educational patterns in the big cities, but at the same time we are justified in being equally skeptical about proposals which are likely to create as many problems as they solve. More specifically, we would do well to withhold judgment on whether the big-city schools can be significantly reformed until a really meaningful attempt has been made to revitalize education in the big-city districts. No such effort has yet been made anywhere in the United States.

Clearly, any potentially effective plan for reforming education as it is practiced in the big cities would have to be many-faceted. One of its central components would have to be a program of teacher retraining far larger than has heretofore been imagined. Nor could such a plan of reform begin to be adequate unless it provided for administrator training and retraining on a scale much more massive than now envisioned in any of our school districts and universities. Similarly, an equally indispensable element would be a set of arrangements to ensure that members of boards of education acquire an adequate understanding of where and why the big-city schools are in such deep trouble. The remainder of this paper is concerned primarily with how this latter goal might be achieved.

A SCHOOL board determined to come to grips with the functional inadequacies and mismanagement which now characterize the big-city school districts could move almost at once to introduce a system for uncovering and highlighting information without which the system can never operate effectively. More concretely, among the many steps a board might take, one in particular has great promise for bringing about significant and continuing improvement in the big-city schools. A department of inspections should be created outside regular administrative channels to systematically collect information on educational conditions in the big-city district. The fact that blatantly dysfunctional situations in the big cities often go unrecognized by officials responsible for the adequacy of the educational program means that neither the superintendent nor board members can rely on traditional channels for identifying and correcting points of weakness in the schools. The present grievance system, for one thing, is likely to be concerned primarily with issues on which an individual feels personally mistreated, whereas many if not most dysfunctional situations involve more general failings on which individuals are less willing to register complaints. Second, grievance procedures as defined here use present channels through which complaints are considered first at the local level where many can be quickly solved and then are directed in prescribed steps up the administrative hierarchy only if the persons involved are unable to work them out. The educational problems in the big cities are too serious, however, to rely on procedures which require individuals to communicate their feelings to their superiors in the organization, for as William G. Scott points out in his book on *The Management of Conflict:*

> The difficulty with many formal programs of redress is that their values and the values of the organization in which they function are not perceived by participants as different. This is why a grin is often provoked when a person is told he can go over his superior's head if he has a problem. He is telling you that he does not believe it will do him any good. . . .[3]

Because most people are aware that major inspections in the armed forces are conducted by inspectors from autonomous units, a good deal of hesitation can be expected concerning the wisdom of adapting a "military" procedure to a public school system. In my opinion objections based solely on such grounds would be gratuitous. For one thing, the rationale behind the pattern of inspections in the armed forces has become increasingly applicable to schools in the great cities: In both cases the survival of society may depend on whether the organization is functioning adequately. In addition, arrangements for systematic and penetrating inspections are characteristic of other kinds of organizations as well as the military. Thus many national firms, particularly those which operate through local franchises, depend on unannounced but regular inspections to acquire feedback on organizational problems. Similarly, the Catholic Church, as Scott points out, has long made use of such arrangements:

> . . . settlement of disputes . . . is accomplished through the function of visitation. The best way to describe the "visitor" is as an ecclesiastical inspector general. Canon law requires the performance of this activity as a check on the temporal and spiritual activities of parishes and religious communities.[4]

Recommending an inspection system does not imply that schools can simply borrow all procedures which may be appropriate in business, religions, or military organizations. What the recommendation does imply is that many school districts are very large organizations susceptible to the same kinds of dysfunctions as are other large organizations, and that the ways problems related to size, complexity, and data collection are handled in other fields are worth the consideration of the educator.

It should also be kept in mind that school districts already are subject to inspections conducted by state departments of education as well as regional accrediting associations, but these arrangements simply do not supply the kinds of information and analysis that need to be acquired within the local system itself. The state departments

Big-City School Dysfunctions and Why They Are Perpetuated

A big-city principal, interviewed by Mr. Levine concerning obvious deficiencies in his school, said this:

> The point is to make things look good, no matter how disruptive the policy may be or how much it may harm the school or the students. Good publicity comes first. I once received a late afternoon telephone call on a Friday before the Christmas vacation directing me to transfer 400 pupils to a new school on the Monday morning when school would reopen two weeks later. This was not the only time we were told on a Friday to transfer hundreds of pupils on the following Monday. What really upset me this time was that there were only four weeks left in the semester. There is no appreciation in the central office that you can't cavalierly interrupt an ongoing program in this way. The main reason why the activities of hundreds of teachers and students were interrupted was to allow the superintendent to announce that there were fewer double shifts.

Levine points out also that many school officials in the big-city districts lack direct, realistic knowledge of what is happening in the schools, while personnel in the schools often are led to believe that accurate information is not really welcomed by decision makers. As a result, the kind of dysfunctions which can and do arise in any school district occur with unusual frequency in the big-city districts. The great emphasis on putting up a good front serves both to generate and maintain these dysfunctions. Their cumulative impact on teacher and pupil morale in the big city often is thoroughly demoralizing. (It is no accident that the adventures in Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase* take place in a big-city school.) Given this setting, it is not surprising that no apparent action had been or was being taken to deal with such illustrations of widespread fixation on appearances as the following which Levine encountered in visiting big-city schools:

- For several years much publicity had been given to a large high school which was described as carrying on a project to use programmed materials in each subject area. The school did indeed have a comprehensive collection of materials for programmed instruction, a collection which overflowed the ceiling-to-floor shelves in a large storage room. Only a small percentage of the teachers, however, were using these materials, and several of the teachers with less than two years of experience had never even examined them. Three years previously the school district had "fulfilled" its programmed instruction project in this school by providing many thousands of dollars of materials and three or four hours of introductory in-service training on the use of teaching machines.

- Just a few weeks before the visit of an accrediting team from the North Central Association, the principal of a large school purchased podiums and globes for each social studies classroom. Both before and after this expensive purchase, social studies teachers had been begging for special materials designed for slow learners. Despite the fact that 84 percent of the school's ninth-graders were reading below the eighth grade level and 56 percent were reading below the sixth grade level, the materials available to the social studies staff consisted almost entirely of regular grade-level textbooks.

almost everywhere are too short of staff to delve very deeply into local situations, particularly in the large cities in which they are reluctant to interfere. Regional accrediting procedures, for their part, are concerned almost entirely with education at the secondary level. While the regional associations perform a very useful and important function, they, too, do not throw sufficient light on the basic educational problems in the big cities. In their annual 1963 reports to the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, for example, all but one of Chicago's 39 secondary school principals marked "yes" in response to the question, "In your opinion, do you have an adequate number of teachers employed to provide effective instruction, direction of extra-class activities, counseling, and other educational services?," and the lone dissenter remarked only that a vacated assistant principal's position had not yet been filled.

To operate most effectively, the department of inspections should consist of two separate units. Personnel in both units would have the authority to probe as deeply as necessary into whatever situations they were currently investigating. Personnel in one unit would periodically visit the schools as well as the central office units which provide supporting services to the schools in order to determine where and why the organization is functioning less effectively than it should. Most of these visits would follow a regular schedule, but some of them would be unannounced and unexpected. Personnel in the second unit would investigate specific complaints and reports of mismanagement arising either within or outside the organization. The processing of grievances in this unit would differ from normal grievance procedures in that complaints to the department of inspections would be handled outside regular channels which lead up through the administrative hierarchy to the superintendent and his staff.

The importance of providing opportunities to express grievances and have them investigated independently of channels now existing in the administrative hierarchy cannot be overemphasized. Although the concept of an independent official with the authority to in-

vestigate and take action when an individual or group believes a government organization to be functioning improperly is still somewhat novel in the United States, such inspectors have become a valued element in social and political life in several Scandanavian countries, and, more recently, in England. Under the name *ombudsman,* such officials have functioned in Sweden since 1809. In general terms, the *ombudsman* investigates complaints to determine whether a citizen has been done an injustice by a government official, and in one way or another takes steps to prosecute offenders or otherwise correct mistreatment where it does exist. The possibility of instituting such a system to guard the rights of citizens in our increasingly impersonal society has been receiving a good deal of attention in recent years, and the first American *ombudsman* is now serving a suburban community in the New York area.

The grievance-handling unit here being proposed would differ from the office of the *ombudsman* in that it would process complaints originating within the organization as well as from the public served, and it would be established as much or more to bring needed information to the attention of school board members and (eventually) central office executives as to correct injustices done to individuals. This need to systematically acquire and bring to light information which is presently submerged and repressed within the labyrinth of the large city school district has been documented in Joseph Pois' book on the Chicago Public Schools. Pois, a professor of public administration and formerly a member of the Chicago Board of Education (1956-1961), points out that board members—at least in the large cities—have a very difficult time finding out what is happening in the schools. As a result, he argues, most of them occupy themselves primarily with trivia having little relevance to the real problems in the schools and the community. Pois' experience as a board member convinced him, moreover, that board members in Chicago could hardly be adequately informed as long as they had to depend on currently existing arrangements for bringing important matters to their considered attention:

> Manifestly, a board should avail itself of the factual material and viewpoints emanating from the general superintendent and his subordinates. Yet, if this is the exclusive source of systematic inquiry and analysis concerning the school system, the board's decision-making must inevitably be determined in large measure by the attitudes and concepts of the bureaucracy. . . . The Chicago Board, when it does seek to tap the informational, statistical, and research resources of the school system, is ordinarily expected to use its general superintendent as the point of contact. Although this may be justified on the basis of protocol or recognition of lines of responsibility in the administrative hierarchy, the end result is that the flow of information is subject to screening, selection, or restatement by the general superintendent. As organizations expand in size it becomes less tenable to contend that the chief administrative or executive officer should be the sole conduit for the transmittal of data or analysis to the governing body. . . . [Even a subordinate duly authorized to deal directly] with a board . . . will be prone to proceed with considerable caution lest he incur the displeasure of his superior.[5]

The difficulties in the organizational and administrative relationships in big-city schools, Pois thus argues justify giving serious consideration, "to the feasibility and desirability of the board having research and analytical facilities entirely apart from the regular administrative staff." He admits that the "elimination of the confidential assistants who formerly served the members of the New York City Board of Education and whose activities apparently made for board conflict with, or usurpation of, the superintendent's authority" provides an argument against having such a unit, but he rightfully insists that "whatever the experience in New York, it would be regrettable if this were regarded as having conclusively demonstrated that it is injudicious to provide school boards in large urban areas with staff services of their own."[6]

WHETHER the department of inspection—or either of its units—should function as a direct arm of the board of education is an open question. In my opinion it would be wiser to have this department report to a special committee composed of several members of the board, the superintendent and several of his staff, several teachers and representatives of teacher organizations, and a small number of additional lay citizens drawn from various community groups. However, the tenure of the department's personnel, and particularly its director, should be determined by the board of education taking into account only the recommendation of those board members on the special committee and not the advice of others who serve on the committee. In any case, a board of education in a big city, as Pois points out, "cannot justifiably be very critical" of the behavior of the many teachers who bombard it with unsolicited, often anonymous, pleas for help, in view of the fact that as of now it has "failed to provide adequate means for the expression and resolution of grievances."[7]

The information provided by the department of inspections could be significant in galvanizing school board members in the big cities into decisive action. No one can say how well the average board member really understands the ineptness with which education in the big city is generally conducted. Most of them must be aware of instances in which something has gone awry in the schools, but board members have no real basis for appreciating the degree to which the educational programs in many schools in their jurisdiction are ineffective and mismanaged. Apparently, then, information is not reaching the board in sufficiently massive doses and with sufficiently objective verification to induce it to push the needed reforms—which inevitably would "shake up" the system a good bit. School board members, after all,

tend to be victims of the system's inertia in the same way as nearly everyone else in the system. But unless board members stand the system on its head, it is hardly possible to deal with the crisis which is growing more severe in the big-city schools. A department of inspections, if it functioned effectively, conceivably might have enough impact to push board members beyond the line which separates sympathetic but cautious understanding from resolute and drastic reform.

TO SUMMARIZE, school districts in the big cities should establish an entirely new department responsible for identifying and correcting dysfunctions which now are tolerated in urban schools. Personnel in one of the two units in this department of inspections would operate analogously to the inspectors who perform this important function in other kinds of large-scale organizations; personnel in the second unit would function somewhat similarly to the *ombudsman*, whose job is to investigate citizen perceptions of unjust or ineffective government, but they would also process information and grievances which employees feel unable to raise through regular channels.

In establishing such units and procedures, a board of education should recognize that its decision could set in motion potentially divisive forces which might create an entirely new set of serious problems for a city's schools. Nevertheless, present organizational arrangements are proving so ineffective that perceptive and informed observers question the viability of the big city districts in their present form; these districts cannot be made to work very satisfactorily without some major changes. It is already widely recognized that big city schools must undertake thoroughgoing curriculum reform and must acquire vast new resources for housing and conducting a variety of instructional services if adequate education is to be provided for the millions of students whose future will be determined in them. In Chicago, for example, Superintendent James F. Redmond has bluntly asked the Board of Education and the public to face up to the fact that the city schools need three-quarters of a billion dollars just for buildings in the next five years.[8] It is not so widely recognized that unless equally significant innovations are made with respect to administration and organization of the big-city districts, a large proportion of these funds might as well be burned as flushed through the ineffectual system which makes the present expenditure of resources so distressingly unproductive. The establishment outside regular administrative channels of a department of inspections would constitute one such innovation.

The establishment of a department of inspections promises a number of important benefits in the social system of the big-city district. Just as the discovery by senior executives in the General Motors Corporation that it sometimes took six months to obtain suitable replies to memos led to important changes that helped make it one of the world's most successful organizations, so the dysfunctions investigated by the department of inspections would help board members and top administrators gain a fuller understanding of why the big-city schools are functioning so poorly and what it would take to improve them. Merely giving serious attention to the dysfunctions which prevent personnel at the school level from working effectively would, in itself, do much to raise morale throughout a big-city school district. A relatively independent department with direct channels to the board of education could initiate action on a number of problems which now go unsolved. At the present time, for example, new superintendents almost never try to replace department heads whose behavior and attitudes may be doing irreparable harm within the big-city districts, because to do so might cause them to lose the confidence of the entire administrative staff. Rather than waiting five or 10 years for the "old palace guard" to retire or resorting to the sometimes wasteful stratagem of grafting all sorts of new positions for his own appointees on a structure handed down from a previous administration, a new superintendent might welcome arrangements which, in effect, supplied a required and independent evaluation of the adequacy of his staff. In addition, superintendents and board members served by a department of inspections could be far more effective as decision makers, for as Peter Drucker recently pointed out in the *Harvard Business Review:*

> Effective decision makers . . . follow a rule which the military developed long ago. The commander who makes a decision does not depend on reports to see how it is carried out. He or one of his aides —goes and looks . . . the reason is that they learned the hard way to distrust abstract "communications."[9]

Is the structure of the educational system as now delineated in the big cities so sacrosanct as to prohibit experimentation with supplementary, semiautonomous components which might help realign and revitalize a poorly functioning bureaucracy? Educators who recognize the need for critical and continuous assessment of modern organizations in accordance with the imperatives of a rapidly changing environment will hardly think so.

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[1]For example, see Christopher Jencks, "Speaking Out: The Public Schools Are Failing," *The Saturday Evening Post*, April, 1966, pp. 14, 18; Martin Meyerson and Edward C. Banfield, *Boston: The Job Ahead*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966, pp. 80-83; and Harvey Pressman, "The Failure of the Public Schools," *Urban Education*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 61-81.

[2]*Education U.S.A.*, January 5, 1967, p. 112.

[3]William G. Scott, *The Management of Conflict*. Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1965, p. 124.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 28.

[5]Joseph Pois, *The School Board Crisis: A Chicago Case Study*. Chicago: Aldine, 1964, pp. 88-89.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 87.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 169.

[8]*The Chicago Sun-Times*, December 18, 1966, p. 1.

[9]Peter F. Drucker, "The Effective Decision," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, 1967, p. 98.

▼ "Soon every respectable institution of higher education will have a computer center as naturally as it has a library."

—Launor Carter, System Development Corp.